

A pox is upon new zinc pennies

By Roger Boye

Many of the new copper-coated zinc pennies being found in circulation suffer from what one hobbyist is called "bad cases of the pox."

The sick coins have several—sometimes dozens—of tiny bubbles within the thin copper plating on both sides. Some experts fear that the bubbles could cause bits of copper to break off.

"Each of the blisters or bubbles in the copper plating is the result of a spot of corrosion [on the zinc core]," wrote Alan Herbert, an author and expert on error coins. "Either the zinc was poorly cleaned or it was allowed to 'weather' [before the plating was added]."

Earlier this month, Herbert reported in his Numismatic News column that roughly 15 percent of the 1982-dated zinc pennies in a batch of 500 had the pox. Since writing the article, he has received letters from around the country indica-

ting that the problem is not just an isolated incident.

The bubbles pose a potentially serious dilemma for Uncle Sam. If the new coins wear out quickly, the government may have to develop still another metal composition for the lowly cent.

When treasury chiefs unveiled the zinc coin several months ago, they promoted it as a cheaper alternative to the nearly all-copper penny that has existed for decades. During 1982 the U.S. Mint is making both types of cents, but by next year production of the traditional copper penny is supposed to end.

Herbert, for one, believes the new zinc coin won't stand up to the punishment it will receive in circulation. In fact, the bubbles likely will be a "continuing problem that eventually will result in the coin losing its copper coating or literally crumbling in our pockets," he said in his column.

"Zinc has a long history of use as a coin metal, but in almost every case it has been a wartime expedient or a 'hard times' emergency substitute for quality metals," Herbert added.

Whatever happens to the new coins, "bubble cents" will be much too common to have any special value to collectors.